



Christian Faith and Economics

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Every person's views on economic issues and the political judgments that interrelate with them have four components: (1) a normative framework; (2) a broad study of society (using disciplines such as economics, history, and politics); (3) an economic/political philosophy; and (4) more detailed study relevant to any specific issue. Most people, to be sure, do not think consciously about these four components. But they are present nonetheless.

For example, consider the great twentieth-century debate between advocates of a market economy and a state-owned and controlled economy. Everyone involved in the debate embraced some normative framework that included ideas about the nature of persons and justice. Everyone thought (or just assumed what their society told them) about the study of economics and the history of different types of economic arrangements. Everyone (consciously or not) combined their normative framework and their broad study of economics and society to form an economic/political philosophy which served as a road map or handy guide when making detailed economic decisions. Finally, everyone thought carefully about (or again, simply accepted the assumptions of

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surrounding society) the detailed analysis relevant to whether a specific economic proposal was wise.

For example, two people could embrace the same normative framework, the same broad study of society and the same economic/political philosophy (say a commitment to a market economy) and still disagree about whether the detailed analyses of raising the minimum wage have shown that doing that helped or hurt poor people. Some economists have argued that the overall impact of raising the minimum wage is to disadvantage poor people. The majority of economists have argued that the impact of raising the minimum wage helps more poor people than it harms. It is important to understand that the disagreement is not about normative values, a broad study of society or political philosophy, but about detailed economic analysis about the actual impact on poor people of raising the minimum wage.

Every person's normative framework has a profound impact on his or her concrete economic decisions. For example, Princeton philosopher Peter Singer, Karl Marx, and traditional Christians have held very different views of the nature of persons and justice. In our highly pluralistic society, people hold different, often contradictory views on all the important normative judgments that shape one's approach to economic and political judgments. Today's radical pluralism makes political decisions in a democratic society much more difficult than if everyone shared the same normative framework.

Obviously, it would be very useful if there were some neutral source for a normative framework that everyone shared. Long ago, Alexis de Tocqueville claimed that "without ideas in common, no common action would be possible For society to prosper, it is essential that all minds of the citizens should always be rallied and held together by some leading ideas."¹

John Rawls (perhaps the most influential political philosopher in the last three decades of the twentieth century) used to claim in his famous book, *A Theory of Justice* (1971) that his method offered a perfectly neutral starting point free of any specific definition of disputed claims about the good. But critics correctly pointed out that Rawls assumed a particular

¹Democracy in America, quoted in Lawrence E. Adams, *Going Public: Christian Responsibility in a Divided Nation* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2002), 67.

(and not universally accepted) view of persons.² And in his later writings, Rawls acknowledged that every person operates with some understanding of the good grounded in that person's most basic religious or philosophical beliefs.³ There is simply no neutral source for a normative framework.⁴

How then shall we proceed given two indisputable realities: (1) as I have illustrated briefly in the preceding paragraphs, a normative framework is an essential component of every economic/political judgment and (2) in our radically pluralistic society, there is no normative framework shared by all or even most citizens. The only acceptable possibility in a free society is to acknowledge this pluralism and invite every citizen to articulate and promote an economic and political agenda that is shaped significantly by each person's deepest religious/philosophical beliefs. Then a democratic society uses free debate and a secret ballot to select legislators who decide what at a specific moment will be legislated. That means that every citizen—whether Hindu, Muslim, atheist, Jew, and Christian—is welcome to propose public policies that are grounded to some significant extent in that person's personal religious/philosophical beliefs.

I am an evangelical Protestant Christian—no, not the Jerry Falwell, Franklin Graham pro-Trump kind (but explaining that would require another lecture!). As an evangelical Christian, I seek to derive my normative framework to some extent from reason, tradition, and experience. But the most basic source for my normative framework comes from the biblical canon of Old and New Testaments. Obviously, when I seek to persuade people in our highly pluralistic society to adopt my proposals on economic justice, I do not normally quote biblical texts. I seek to use language and offer arguments that are understandable and (hopefully) persuasive for people with many different religious/philosophical beliefs. But

²For a critique of Rawls see Raymond Plant, *Politics, Theology and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 331–347; Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 62–64; and Ashley Woodiwiss, 'Rawls, Religion, and Liberalism,' in Thomas W. Heilke and Ashley Woodiwiss, eds., *The Re-Enchantment of Political Science* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2001), Chapter 3.

³See the discussion in Ronald J. Sider, *Just Politics: A Guide for Christian Engagement* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2012), 22.

⁴"Natural law" advocated by many Catholics makes a similar claim to offer a neutral starting point. See my critique in *ibid.*, 21.

that does not change the fact that the normative framework that shapes my economic proposals comes from the biblical canon.

In this paper, therefore, I will seek first to define key biblical norms that shape my thinking about economic life and then second, show how I develop an economic/political philosophy which hopefully flows both from these key biblical norms and also my careful study of society generally and economics in particular.

Four normative issues are especially important: the nature of persons; the shape of justice; God's special concern for the poor; and the role of government.

First, the nature of persons. The first chapter of the Bible declares that persons—every person!—is created in the very image of God. Human beings are the only part of the created order that the Bible declares to bear the divine image. The creation story also makes it clear that the responsibility for (stewardship of) the rest of the creation which flows from bearing the image of God means that persons must lovingly watch over and care for (Genesis 2:15) the rest of creation. Precisely because every person—no matter how rich or poor, young or old, weak or strong—is created in the image of God, the law and the prophets in the Old Testament spell out how God wants every person to be treated.

The incarnation underlines even more powerfully the worth and value of every individual. Christians believe that the Creator of the galaxies became a human being—thus demonstrating in a powerful way that being human involves an immeasurably great dignity. Furthermore, the Incarnate One demonstrated a special concern for children, lepers, despised Samaritans, oppressed women—thus teaching that every individual person—even the most marginalized—is immeasurably valuable. Furthermore, Christians believe that Jesus died to offer salvation to every human being. Christians also believe that every single person is invited to live forever with the Risen Lord. Biblical teaching affirms the value, dignity, and worth of every person in a profoundly deep way.

But the biblical view of persons also has a crucial communal side. Contrary to modern thinking (deeply shaped by John Locke), persons are not isolated individuals whose essential purpose is self-fulfillment. Every person is made in the image of the Triune God—who Christians believe, is three persons in one substance. Because persons are created in the image of the divine triune community, they only reach the fulfillment intended by their Creator when they are living in right relationship with their neighbors. Neither Testament describes salvation only as a personal,

individual relationship with God. One central aspect of salvation in both the Old and New Testaments is a new kind of visible social community. In the Old Testament that meant economic arrangements shaped by justice. In the New Testament, that means the rich sharing dramatically with the poor; that means men accepting women in astonishingly new ways; that means masters treating slaves as persons; and that means Jews and Gentiles overcoming the worst racial hatred in the ancient world.

The biblical understanding of persons transcends both the radical individualism of contemporary Western culture and the excessive communalism of both traditional cultures and communistic societies. Biblical faith affirms both the profound dignity and freedom of every person and also our need for wholesome, just community. That biblical understanding will significantly shape my view of the best economic framework.

One other aspect of the biblical view of persons is very important. Created good, persons have rebelled against God and the result is deeply selfish persons and unjust social structures. Because of this profound selfishness that inclines every person to use any power they possess for selfish advantage, all human institutions must be structured to avoid centralized, unchecked power.

Second, a biblical understanding of justice. Much modern Western thought believes that justice is merely a subjective feeling. Whereas biblical faith teaches that public law should reflect a divine standard of justice, many contemporaries argue that human laws are merely human products designed by the powerful for their own self-interest (often, in fact that is what happens!). Again and again, the Bible says God loves justice, reveals the essential shape of genuine justice, and demands that God's people promote justice.

One of the great debates of the twentieth century was whether justice is only procedural or also distributive. Does justice refer only to whether the procedures (e.g., the judicial systems) are fair or does justice also refer to outcomes (i.e., whether the distribution of land, income, health care, etc.) is fair? Political philosophers like Robert Nozick argued for an exclusively procedural view. If the procedures are fair, the outcome is just regardless of the distributive outcome.⁵

The two key Hebrew words for justice are *mishpat* and *tsedaqah*. Frequently, these words are translated as "justice" and "righteousness," but

⁵See the discussion of Nozick in Karen Lebacqz, *Six Theories of Justice* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 51–55.

they both refer to right relations in the socio-economic order. Examination of their use demonstrates that they refer to both procedural and distributive justice. The words certainly refer to unbiased courts that render impartial justice to rich and poor (e.g. Leviticus 19:15; Deuteronomy 1:17–19). Equally clearly, the same words are used to demand distributive justice—i.e. economic justice where everyone has access to economic sufficiency (e.g. Isaiah 5:7–9; Amos 5:11–12; Micah 2:2; 6:8). Often too, the words refer to a restorative process that delivers people from economic oppression.⁶

The Old Testament discussion of the distribution of the land in Israel provides crucial insight into the content of the biblical understanding of distributive justice. Since Israel was an agricultural society, land was the basic resource needed to create wealth and enjoy an adequate economic existence. Israel was different from surrounding societies. In Egypt, the pharaoh or the temples owned most of the land. In other Near Eastern societies, a feudal system existed where the king granted a few people large tracts of land worked by landless laborers.

According to Joshua 18 and Numbers 26, each Israelite family received their own land when Israel moved into the land of Canaan.⁷ After a scholarly study of Israel in the time of the judges, Norman Gottwald concluded that Israel at that time was a relatively egalitarian society of small landowners.⁸ The Old Testament also contains measures that if followed would prevent the accumulation of most of the land in a few hands. Leviticus 25 prescribes that no matter why families lost their ancestral land, they should receive it back at the fiftieth year of Jubilee.

The prophetic writings, however, make it very clear that in the period of the kings, many people lost their land as the kings and their close associates accumulated vast holdings. In fact, the prophets declare that this economic injustice so angered God that God sent the nations of Israel and then Judah into captivity. But the prophets also looked ahead to a

⁶The vast number of texts that speak of God's special concern for the poor also underlines the fact that in the biblical framework, justice includes a major distributive component. See further Sider, *Just Politics*, 81–90.

⁷Whether or not these texts reflect actual history, they reveal the Old Testament's socio-economic ideal.

⁸*The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel 1250–1050BCE* (London: SCM Press, 1979).

future Messianic time when all persons would again enjoy their own land free of fear that powerful people would seize it (Micah 4:4).⁹

An important criterion of economic justice emerges from this biblical discussion of the land in Israelite society. Land is the basic capital in an agricultural society. And the biblical ideal for the land is not that the king or a few wealthy people own all the land, but rather that every family has their own land. The basic principle is that God wants every person and family to have access to the productive resources so that if they act responsibly, they can earn an adequate income and be dignified members of their community. Obviously, in our information society, knowledge is the most important capital. Therefore, applying this principle of economic justice to contemporary society means, especially (although not exclusively) that every person must have access to an excellent education.

Third, a special concern for the poor. One of the most frequent themes in the biblical canon is that God has a special concern for the poor and that God's people must do likewise. There are literally hundreds of verses on this theme in the Bible. God acts in history to lift up the poor and oppressed (Deuteronomy 26:5–8). God so identifies with the poor that being kind to the poor is like making a loan to God (Proverbs 19:17). God casts down both those who get rich by oppressing others and also people with abundant resources who simply fail to share (e.g. James 5:15; Ezekiel 16:49–50). Indeed, biblical texts even say that no matter what one's religious words or sacred activities, religious people who neglect the poor are not really God's people at all (e.g. Amos 5:21–24). Jesus even said that those who do not feed the hungry and clothe the naked depart eternally from the Living God (Matthew 25:41).¹⁰

God measures societies in part by what they do to the poorest, weakest and most marginalized. A vigorous emphasis on empowering poor people must be a central part of any biblically shaped approach to economics.

Fourth, *the role of government.* The Old Testament repeatedly prescribes a role for the king to promote economic justice. A text about Solomon uses the two key Hebrew words for justice to describe the king's role: The Lord “has made you king to maintain justice and righteousness”

⁹For a fuller discussion of the Old Testament material on the land, see Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, 6th ed. (Nashville: W Publishing, 2015), 72–80 and Sider, *Just Politics*, 90–96.

¹⁰For an extended treatment of this topic, see my *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, 45–69.

(1 Kings 10:19). God was pleased with King Josiah because “he defended the cause of the poor and needy” (Jeremiah 22:15–16). We have seen that Leviticus 25 called for every family to receive back its ancestral land at the fiftieth year of Jubilee. And Deuteronomy 15 prescribed the forgiveness of debts every seven years. Neither text in any way suggests that forgiving debts in the seventh year or returning a family’s ancestral land on the fiftieth year was a voluntary optional act that persons were free to practice or ignore. Presumably, the rulers were supposed to implement these laws.

Nehemiah 5 contains a striking example of governmental redistribution of economic resources. Nehemiah the governor learned that during a famine, rich powerful Jews had oppressed poor Jews. Poor Jewish people had mortgaged their land to buy food and eventually lost their land. Other poor Jews sold their children into slavery. Furious, Nehemiah the ruler called a general assembly and denounced the powerful oppressors. “Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the interest you are charging them” (Nehemiah 5:11). And Nehemiah demanded that the rich take an oath to keep their promises. Nehemiah did not even wait for the next Jubilee to demand the return of ancestral land. As the Governor (i.e. the head of the government), he implemented economic justice which meant everyone having access to the productive resources. There is simply no biblical basis for a libertarian philosophy that states that government should play no role in promoting economic justice.

In order to arrive at some clarity on what shape I believe economic life should have today, I seek to combine my normative framework (derived as carefully as possible from the biblical canon) with a careful study of society using the tools of economics, history and politics.

PRIVATE OWNERSHIP, A MARKET ECONOMY AND THE DECENTRALIZATION OF POWER

Probably the greatest economic debate of the twentieth-century raged between those supporting a socialist/communist approach and those favoring a capitalist/free-market economy. In the first model, the state owns most or all of the means of production and government agencies set wages, prices and production levels. (A central planning office in Moscow set millions of prices each year.) In the second model, private persons own the bulk of the means of production and supply and demand determines most prices and wages.

Both biblical norms and the experience of the last one-hundred years underline the weaknesses of the first model.

A biblical normative framework raises serious questions about a state-owned, state-controlled economy. The biblical view of persons suggests that God creates each person to be a co-worker with God in shaping the material world. That calling is undermined if a few people make all the important decisions. Furthermore, from the Ten Commandments' prohibition against stealing to Jesus' call to his disciples to make loans to the poor, the Bible seems to affirm the virtue of private property—although it also makes clear that the God who demands economic justice for everyone is the only absolute owner (Leviticus 25:23). The principle that in a sinful world, people with unchecked centralized power will almost certainly use that power to oppress others also points to the importance of private property. Widespread private ownership fundamentally decentralizes power. On the other hand, when the state owns and controls all productive assets, then economic and political power are highly centralized.

The experience of the last hundred years demonstrates that the communist model has huge negative results. The unchecked power of communist political leaders resulted in the loss of freedom (religion, speech, assembly) as the state sought to, and largely succeeded in, controlling every sector of society. It also resulted in the channeling of vast special privileges to a tiny party elite—in contradiction of the communist egalitarian ideal. It is no accident that societies with widespread private ownership enjoy higher levels of freedom than societies where the state owns most or all of the means of production. Widespread private ownership decentralizes power in a way that makes it much more difficult for political leaders to dominate all of society for their selfish advantage.

Furthermore, the communist model proved to be less economically efficient. No group of bureaucrats in a central office knows enough to wisely determine prices and levels of production for a whole society. The market mechanism of supply and demand simply works better. That is substantially why China experienced explosive economic growth after the Chinese government increasingly embraced major aspects of a free-market economy after 1979.

I conclude that both biblical norms and historical experience indicate that a largely privately owned economy where supply and demand determine most wages and prices is the preferred economic model.¹¹ And the fact that widespread adoption of this economic model has contributed greatly to a dramatic drop in global poverty means that on balance the poor of the earth have benefited. Tens of millions of very poor people in South Korea and Taiwan and more recently many hundreds of millions of very poor people in China, India, Indonesia, and elsewhere are no longer poor in part because their nations embraced important aspects of a market economy.

But that in no way means that today's market economies have no problems when judged by a biblical normative framework.

For one thing, the ideal assumed by market-economy theorists seldom or ever exists. Ideally, both consumers and potential competitors have full information, monopolies do not exist, and there are no externalities. But in real life advertising manipulation and monopolies often work to promote excessive benefits to a few.

Second, at least one-quarter of the world's people do not enjoy what the biblical economic norm demands—access for everyone to the productive capital needed to earn an adequate living. Vast numbers of people have virtually no capital. They have no land, almost no money and extremely little or very poor education. A market-economy simply supplies what the people with capital demand. It allows the others to die of starvation or disease.

Third, in recent decades, capitalist societies have seen vast concentrations of income and wealth in small elites. In the United States, the richest 1% own more wealth than the bottom 90%.¹² In recent years, more than 90% of all the growth in national income has flowed to the richest one percent.¹³ Income inequality is greater today than at any time since just before the Great Depression.¹⁴

¹¹For a longer discussion of these issues, see Sider, *Just Politics*, 113–115 and Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, 147–156.

¹²See Christopher Ingraham in the *Washington Post*, December, 2017.

¹³According to Josh Barro in *Business Insider*, September 12, 2013. See also the data cited in my *Fixing the Moral Deficit* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2012), 26.

¹⁴See Chad Stone et al., “A Guide to Statistics on Historical Trends in Income Inequality,” Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, February 16, 2018, <https://cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/a-guide-to-statistics-on-historical-trends-in-income-inequality>.

Why is that a problem? Not because making a great deal of money from a new invention that benefits many people is bad (It is not). Nor because the biblical norm is equality of income and wealth (It is not). But both the biblical doctrine of human selfishness and human history warn that centralized power will be used for the selfish advantage of the few.

How much economic inequality is acceptable and when does it become destructive to the rest of society? Neither the biblical canon nor historical wisdom provide any precise mathematical answer to that question. But at least one fundamental principle is relevant. One crucial aspect of economic justice is that everyone must have access to the productive assets so they can earn an adequate living. That means that whenever the extremes of wealth and income make it difficult or prevent some people from having access to adequate productive capital, or prevent society from caring for the young, old and disabled who cannot care for themselves, that inequality is wrong and must be corrected. An increase in economic inequality that harms the poorer members of society and hinders their opportunity to gain access to adequate, productive capital is unjust. Lord Acton's dictum that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely underlines this point.

I would argue that the extremes of income and wealth in the United States today have reached that point. The *New York Times* reported on October 10, 2015, that almost one-half of all the campaign contributions for the presidential candidates from both parties had come from just 158 extremely wealthy families. Is it surprising that many powerful politicians promote policies that both provide huge tax cuts to the richest Americans and also would cut food stamps and health coverage for poorer Americans? And these same politicians refuse to vote for adequate funding to provide quality educational opportunity for millions of poor, minority, inner-city children. Clearly, the high concentration of wealth is undermining the opportunity for poorer Americans to acquire adequate nutrition, health care, and the capital to become self-sufficient.

Interestingly, some economic studies seem to show that great economic inequality is also harmful to the economy. A study by the International Monetary Fund suggested strongly that the sharp increase in economic inequality just before the Great Depression (starting in 1929) and the Great Recession (starting in 2007) contributed significantly to both

economic disasters. Another study showed that a decrease in inequality produces substantial economic growth.¹⁵

A fourth problem with today's market economies is that they are creating dangerous environmental changes that will very likely impose huge costs on future generations. Unfortunately, markets pay little attention to future generations. The market fails to account for the "externality" of environmental pollution.

These problems with today's market economies can be fixed. But that will require the right kind of governmental action. The libertarian notion that government has no role in empowering poor people and that all we need to overcome poverty is a totally laissez-faire market-economy contradicts both biblical teaching on the role of government and the historical experience of countries like South Korea and Taiwan. Earlier, we saw that the Bible describes a significant role for government to empower poor people. And careful study of countries like South Korea and Taiwan show that their economic "miracles" were the result of the adoption of a market economy along with the right kind of governmental activity.

In South Korea, economic growth started around 1952. Governmental action increased the percentage of farmers who owned their own land from 50 to 94%.¹⁶ Something similar happened in Taiwan. In addition, the governments in both countries invested heavily in health, education and job training. An activist government was central to the economic explosion in both nations. Nobel laureate economist Amartya Sen stresses the importance of the right kind of government action. "In the past of the rich countries today we can see quite a remarkable history of public action, dealing, respectively, with education, health care, land reforms and so on."¹⁷

¹⁵ Michael Kumhof and Romain Rancière. "Leveraging Inequality," *Finance and Development*, 47, no. 4 (2010), 28–31; Andrew G. Berg and Jonathan D. Ostry. "Equality and Efficiency," *Finance and Development*, 48, no. 3 (2011). www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2011/09/berg.htm. See also, Joseph E. Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality*. New York: Norton 2012, especially Chapter 4.

¹⁶ United Nations, *Human Development Report 1993*, 30. New York: UNDP, 1993.

¹⁷ *Development as Freedom* (New York: Knopf, 1999), 143. See also Abhijit Vinayak Banerjee and Esther Duflo, *Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty*, 46–58, 81–104, 394–401 (New York: Public Affairs, 2011).

I can sketch only very briefly how my economic/political philosophy (grounded I hope in a normative biblical framework and a careful—as unbiased as possible!—study of the best societal research by economists, sociologists, historians, etc.) leads me to more specific contemporary judgments about economic and political life. But here are a few examples.

Government has a significant role to play in promoting economic justice but government must remain limited. Government rightly designs educational systems that promote quality education for every child. Generous Pell grants that enable children from poor families to achieve a college degree creates not dependency but self-sufficiency for a life time—and therefore acts as a just measure of economic redistribution. Because every person is created in the image of God, society (family, religious institutions, non-governmental agencies, and government) should guarantee that everyone has access to quality health care, basic food and housing. Whenever other institutions are unable to provide necessary resources, government rightly acts to prevent hunger, insufficient health care, inadequate housing, etc. But always, government activity must be shaped in a way that nurtures self-sufficiency, not dependency. And it must strengthen, rather than undermine, non-governmental institutions like family. (For example, a welfare policy that undermines rather than strengthens stable two-parent families is misguided.) The earned income tax credit (which both reduces poverty and rewards work and responsibility) illustrates the right kind of government-mandated promotion of economic justice. Tax policies (like the graduated income tax) that require that richer members of society pay taxes at higher levels than poorer people rightly provide the funds to promote economic redistribution that offers everyone access to productive resources. It also tends to prevent a dangerous concentration of wealth in just a few hands. Able-bodied people have a moral obligation to work responsibly and society has a responsibility to provide jobs that pay a living wage to all who do work responsibly.

The reality of human selfishness means that unchecked, centralized power is always dangerous. That is one important reason why government policy should always seek to strengthen rather than undermine non-governmental institutions. That is also why governmental policy should support strong (democratically run!) unions because unions rightly offer a counterweight to otherwise unchecked corporate power.

Always, government policy should seek to empower the poorer members of society. Every legislative proposal should be evaluated in part on what is its likely effect on the poorest.

Obviously, applying my economic/political philosophy to any specific issue in any specific society is a complex task. There is no mathematical formula for determining when a specific legislative proposal properly balances the role of governmental and non-governmental institutions. Or when specific legislation would result in excessive centralized governmental power. Or what kind of governmental action is needed to prevent a few non-governmental institutions (e.g. banks, private corporations) from consolidating massive unchecked power. Prudential wisdom and genuine dialogue with those who disagree and present conflicting data are essential.

The mere fact that a Christian seeks to ground her economic/political agenda in a normative biblical framework and careful, factually grounded study of society does not guarantee that her concrete proposals will be wise and effective. Unforeseen consequences regularly occur. But a persistent commitment to improving one's understanding of both biblical norms and the best factual data provides an excellent foundation for improving one's concrete agenda. If one starts with the belief that every person, no matter how poor or weak, is created in the image of God and is therefore inestimably precious; that justice demands systems that empower people with few resources to have access to the capital to earn a good living; that God's special concern for the poor means that God and God's people measure societies especially by what they do to the poor; and that government properly acts to redistribute resources in effective ways that empower poor people; if one starts with this set of normative commitments, then one will support effective programs that empower poorer members of society and reduce dangerous extremes of income and wealth. Always, of course one will have to evaluate concrete programs designed to reach these goals to determine whether they are effective and if effective, whether they are the most effective ways to reach these goals.

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